



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## ON THE DATE OF THE CRUCIFIXION.

---

By the REV. ARTHUR WRIGHT, M.A.,  
Fellow and Tutor of Queen's College, Cambridge, England.

---

### IV.

Did the crucifixion take place in the year 29 A.D., or in any other year between 27 and 35?

To argue this question at length would take a volume. Those who wish to see what has been done at it can read Wieseler's *Synopsis*, Salmon's *Introduction to the New Testament*, McClellan's *New Testament*, and an article in the *Church Quarterly Review* for January, 1892. I will try to state the facts briefly and make some observations upon them.

Christ suffered at the passover under Pontius Pilate, while Caiaphas was high priest, but while Annas, the last high priest but three, was still living and exercising paramount influence.

We do not know the date of the death or decline in power of Annas, but Pilate resided as Procurator in Judæa ten years (27–37 A.D.) Caiaphas began and ended his term of office sooner. The last passover at which he can have officiated was in A.D. 35. The period, therefore, in which the crucifixion must have taken place is narrowed down to the nine years 27–35 A.D.

Astronomical calculations have been several times made with a view to eliminate some of these years. For as the crucifixion took place on Friday, the 14th (or possibly the 15th) of Nisan, all those years in which the 14th of Nisan cannot have fallen on Friday (or Thursday) may be set aside. By this method the years 28, 29, 31, 32, 34, and 35 have been got rid of, and there remain only 27, 30, and 33, of which 27 is too early and 33 probably too late. Most of the authorities accept the year 30 A.D.

But, as I pointed out in the last paper, we are never sure to

a day which is the first day—or any other day—of the month, and often we cannot be sure to a month when the new year began. Thus an element of uncertainty is introduced which may vitiate all our calculations.

The writer in the *Church Quarterly*, to whom I have alluded, takes advantage of this to plead for the year 29. If in that year Nisan fell a month earlier than modern astronomy would allow, Friday, the 14th of Nisan, would coincide with March 18. And it is remarkable that March 18, 29 A.D., was given (Epiphanius tells us) in the Apocryphal *Acts of Pilate* as the true date of the crucifixion.

Dr. Lipsius has written a treatise on the *Acts of Pilate* (*Die Pilatus-Acten*, Kiel, 1886). The text of these acts, as it exists now, has been tampered with by some scribe who adhered to the chronology of our Lord's ministry, which was compiled by Eusebius. The result is a confused medley. But there is no reason to doubt that Epiphanius gives us the reading of the Acts which was current in his day, and the very strangeness of the date is considered to be a proof that we have here a genuine tradition.

How far is it supported by the gospels and by the opinion of the ante-Nicene fathers?

SS. Luke and John are the only evangelists who give us any further clue to the date. Let us look at S. John's statements first.

2 : 13. "The passover of the Jews [March–April] was nigh and Jesus went up to Jerusalem," cf. 2 : 23. [This visit was shortly after his baptism].

2 : 20. "In forty-six years was this temple built."

4 : 35. "Say ye not, four months more and harvest comes?"

5 : 1. "After these things was a feast [name not given] of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem."

¶ 6 : 4. "And the passover [March–April] the feast of the Jews was nigh." [Jesus spent this passover in Galilee].

7 : 2. "And the feast of the Jews, tabernacles [October] was nigh."

8 : 57. "Thou art not yet fifty years old."

10 : 22. "Then came the dedication [December] in Jerusalem; it was winter."

11 : 55. "And the passover of the Jews [March-April] was nigh." [At this passover the crucifixion took place].

S. Luke's list is shorter :

1 : 5. "In the days of Herod" the Great [who died B. C. 4, spring] Christ was born. S. Matthew (2 : 4) confirms this.

2 : 2. "There issued a decree from Augustus Cæsar that all the civilized world should be enrolled. This, a first enrollment, was made when Quirinius was proconsul of Syria."

[Quirinius was proconsul of Syria A.D. 6-10. It is not improbable that he had been proconsul once before in B.C. 4, but he could hardly have held a census of Judæa while Herod the Great or Archelaus reigned. [Archelaus was deposed A.D. 6].

3 : 1. "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Cæsar [A.D. 28-29] John the Baptist began to preach."

3 : 23. "And Jesus himself was beginning to be about thirty years old" at his baptism.

When we look at these dates the first question that strikes us is, How long did our Lord's ministry last? The earliest answer is that of Irenæus, who puts it at about twenty years, for he began to teach when about thirty years old (Luke 3 : 23) and continued till nearly fifty (John 8 : 57) and as he came to save and sanctify every time of life, it was fitting that he should pass through age as well as youth. Now Irenæus was born in the province of Asia, the very center of church life in the sub-apostolic age. No one had a better opportunity of getting correct information than he; and he declares that "all the elders who had known John the disciple of the Lord in Asia witness that he gave them this tradition." (Adv. Haer. 11 : 22, 4 ff., v. xxxiii. 3).

The Bishop of Durham (Dr. Westcott) in his Commentary on John (8 : 57) writes: "However strange it may appear, some such view is not inconsistent with the only fixed historical dates which we have with regard to our Lord's life, the date of his birth, his baptism, and the banishment of Pilate."

Suppose the crucifixion to have taken place at the latest pos-

sible date, viz., A.D. 35. Fifty years from that would bring us to 15 B.C. Our Lord, if born then, would have been eleven years old at Herod's death, and the flight into Egypt (Matt. 2 : 13) must either be rejected as unhistorical or must have lasted several years, and would thus come into conflict with S. Luke 2 : 39-41, in which we read that Joseph and Mary, after performing all the requirements of the law respecting Mary's purification, returned to Nazareth and dwelt there, except that they annually visited Jerusalem to keep the passover. Again Tiberius celebrated his *decennia* or tenth year festivities in A.D. 24. His fifteenth year, therefore, was 28-29, at which date our Lord would have been forty-four years old, and not, as S. Luke affirms, about thirty (Luke 3 : 23). In the third place, the census under Quirinius (Luke 2 : 2) will be twenty-one years wrong and quite impossible. I wish that the bishop had stated his exact meaning more clearly. It seems to me that ten years is the utmost length to which we can stretch the ministry without throwing overboard S. Luke's chronology altogether. That it really did last about ten years I think not improbable. It would be natural to say "You are not yet fifty" to a man of nearly forty, but, bad though the Jews were as observers, they would hardly say this to a man of thirty-two, especially when "You are not yet forty" would be more suitable for rhetorical reasons, and there does not seem to be any mystical significance in the number fifty that they should choose it on that account.

If the ministry lasted about ten years, the gospels are seen to be more fragmentary than ever, S. John's feasts are not a complete list, and new significance is given to his rhetorical *hyperbolé* in 21 : 25 : "There are many other things which Jesus did, and if they be written every one, I suppose that not even the world itself would contain the books which should be written."

On the other hand, the Gnostics, the Clementine homilies, Clement of Alexandria, and other ante-Nicene authorities restrict the ministry to one year, in defense of which opinion they quoted the verse, "To preach the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4 : 19). These persons have some right to claim the synoptists

on their side. The entire absence of dates from S. Mark gives the impression that no great length of time is described in his gospel, and that impression is heightened by his fifty-six "straight-ways." If the events really cover a period of three or more years, my contention of the unchronological character of S. Peter's memoirs<sup>1</sup> is fully established. S. Luke seems to me either to have held that the ministry lasted one year only or to have put the crucifixion about A.D. 33. When he says that the Baptist began to preach in the fifteenth year of Tiberius (A.D. 28-29) he cannot leave more than a year for the ministry unless the crucifixion be postponed. It is easy, as we have seen, to postpone it, but we should not thereby set matters right, for S. Luke's date for the commencement of the ministry would clash with John 2 : 20, where we read, "In forty-six years was this temple built." Herod began to restore the temple in B.C. 20 (Josephus B. J. 1 : 21 (16) 1. Antt. 15 : 11 [14 : 1]). Forty-six years from that date will bring us to A.D. 26, or to the pass-over of 27.

The pressure of this difficulty has so long been felt that commentators have suggested that S. Luke calculated the reign of Tiberius, not from the death of Augustus in August, A. D. 14, but from a supposed partition of the imperial power two years and a half earlier. For this partition there is no warrant, and we can have little hesitation in setting it aside as a fiction suggested by harmonists in despair.

I have shown that all the chronological data in S. Luke are "editorial notes" and stand on a different footing historically from the rest of the gospel. They are S. Luke's own ideas, the result of his private investigations. It seems to me to be impossible to get over the difficulties which Schürer in his "History of the Jewish People in the Time of Christ" has shown to lie in the account of the census (Luke 2 : 2). There is a similar difficulty about Theudas in Acts 5 : 36, unless Josephus has made a mistake, which is not unlikely. It is of the utmost importance in apologetics to recognize different degrees of historical attestation in the gospels. There are occasionally weak links. We

<sup>1</sup> *Composition of the Four Gospels*, pp. 21-22.

must not make the strength of the chain depend on them, but deny that the gospels are constructed on the chain principle.

But how did those authors who reduced the ministry to one year explain S. John? It was suggested by M. H. Browne (*Ordo sæclorum*, 1844) that the defining words "the passover" in John 6:4 are a mistaken gloss, and that the verse originally ran "Now the feast of the Jews was nigh," by which statement a Jew would mean the feast of tabernacles (the same feast which is mentioned in 7:2), but a Christian would more naturally understand the passover. The words in question are found in every extant manuscript and version of S. John, nor is any doubt of their genuineness asserted by ancient writers. Nevertheless Dr. Hort has obelized them in Westcott and Hort's Greek Testament, rather for calling attention to ancient chronologies than to assert that they are really spurious. Unless they were absent from certain manuscripts, he does not see how they can have been overlooked.

If they were struck out, S. John's chronology would become beautifully simple. His feasts would run, passover (March-April; 2:13, 23), pentecost (?) (May; 5:1), tabernacles (October; 6:4; 7:2), dedication (December; 10:22) passover (March-April; 11:55), and the whole period would cover one year together with a few weeks which intervened between the baptism and the first passover.

We must not bring up John 4:35 to disprove this view. That verse may mean "Harvest is four months distant from the present moment." And if it does mean that, Christ must have been speaking in or near December, for the Jewish harvest fell in April; whereas the one-year hypothesis would require him to be speaking shortly after passover, in April itself. But the verse is almost certainly a proverb: "Say not ye [when you have planted your barley] four months more and harvest comes?" Barley was planted about the end of November. Four months is the *minimum* time between the close of sowing and the commencement of reaping.

The one-year ministry would solve many difficulties. It is the only scheme which reconciles S. Luke, S. Matthew and S.

John. Possibly it is true. What I wish to emphasize is this consideration, that if we cannot positively decide between one year and ten, we must be prepared to keep our minds open on many biblical controversies.

Eusebius decided that our Lord's ministry lasted four years. He assumed that the unnamed feast in S. John 5:1 was a passover. Many students at a very early date adopted this view, for S. John's curiously indefinite statement, "After these things was *a* feast of the Jews," was altered in the second century into the more natural "*the* feast," which Christians took for the passover. The first year, therefore (which was probably a short one) ended, according to Eusebius, with the passover of 2:13, 23; the second year with the supposed passover of 5:1; the third with the passover of 6:4, and the fourth with the passover of 11:55, at which the crucifixion took place. Eusebius, whose chronological system obtained wide acceptance, argued thus: (1) We read in S. Luke 3:1 of the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. Our Lord's ministry must have begun under Annas and ended under Caiaphas. Three high priests came between them. Allowing them one year apiece (John 11:49-51; 18:13) we get four years. (2) Our Lord's ministry began in A. D. 29, the fifteenth year of Tiberius, and a solar eclipse took place during the crucifixion. Phlegon mentions an eclipse of the sun in the year A. D. 33. This also gives four years. (3) Daniel, 9:27, speaks of three and a half weeks, at the end of which the sacrifice and meat offering should cease. Assume that each week represents a year and you get three years and a half for the ministry.

The first of these arguments rests on a mistake. S. Luke says that when the Baptist came forth "Annas *or* Caiaphas (as we should express it) was high priest." Caiaphas was the nominee of Rome, Annas exercised the real power. The faithful hesitated to give the sacred title to the puppet who depended for his position on the will of the foreigner. The second argument rests on a double mistake. A solar eclipse cannot happen when the moon is at the full, as must be the case during passover, nor can it last much longer than eight minutes. True, Eusebius



might quote S. Luke who, according to the true text, attributed the term three hours' darkness to an eclipse of the sun; but this he did in one of his "editorial notes," which, as we have seen, express his own opinions which are not always warranted. Of all the schemes which we have examined, this four years (or rather three years and a half) scheme of Eusebius has been the most popular because of the prophecy of Daniel, the meaning of which is at least uncertain. It is supposed also to be supported by S. Luke 13:7, "Behold there are three years from the time that I come seeking fruit on this fig tree," though the number "three" in a parable is more likely to have a mystical meaning of completeness, as in S. Luke 11:5; 13:21, 32.

Much more may be said for the scheme which makes the ministry last two years and a fraction. This reduces the discrepancy between SS. Luke and John, suits the date of the temple building, and accords with the Acts of Pilate.

The unnamed feast of S. John 5:1 is not in the least degree likely to be passover, pentecost or tabernacles. It is much more probably a minor festival. Wieseler, Meyer and Godet argue for Purim (March), Dr. Westcott for trumpets (September)

We have passed in review a great number of subjects of engrossing interest to all biblical students. We have shown that many received opinions need revision. We have pointed out places where further investigation is desirable and we have submitted some new proposals. Our general conclusion is, that certainty is unattainable, but unless the ministry lasted about ten years, the most probable date for the crucifixion is 9 A.M. to 3 P.M., on Friday the fourteenth of Nisan, A. D. 29, and that the fourteenth of Nisan probably fell on March 18.